

Petrarch and the ghosts of the classical past

Philip Hardie

Not only do we owe the preservation of many classical texts to the activities of Renaissance scholars, we can learn a lot from the ways in which they read and reacted to classical literature. Here Philip Hardie introduces the most important Renaissance figure of all in this respect – Petrarch.

Petrarch (1304–74) is often thought of as the founder of the Renaissance, the revival of classical culture through a programme of education, writing, politics, and art, which drew its inspiration from a renewed attention to the texts of Roman, and later also Greek, antiquity. The term ‘Renaissance’ (‘rebirth’) is not one that Petrarch would have used (that label was invented in the sixteenth century with reference to the rebirth of a classicizing art). But Petrarch’s relationship to the classical past is marked by a great yearning to bring back to life the famous men and writers of Greece and Rome, to disinter and reanimate the corpses of the past, and to revive ancient literature in a series of his own works in Latin, in prose and verse.

Petrarch is famous as the author of the sonnets to Laura in Italian, poems now far more widely read than his Latin works. The sonnets are often seen as the start of a modern tradition of lyric poetry, a first-person expression of the intimate desires and frustrations of the poet. But Petrarch himself experienced equally intense desires and frustrations in his relationship with the classical past.

Petrarch and Virgil

One of Petrarch’s greatest loves was Virgil. His own copy of Virgil survives in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, with numerous annotations in Petrarch’s own hand, and with a specially commissioned frontispiece painted about 1340 by the fashionable Sienese painter Simone Martini. This shows the late-antique commentator on Virgil, Servius, pulling back a curtain to reveal the reclining Virgil, together with a shepherd, farmer, and soldier representing Virgil’s three major works, the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and

Aeneid. Servius’ action might also be taken to symbolize Petrarch’s own desire to uncover and reveal the past in its fullness of life.

Just how much empathy with Virgil Petrarch had is shown by his note against the last line of the *Aeneid* (‘with a groan Turnus’ life fled indignant down to the shades’): ‘You were too true a prophet of your own fate, Virgil; for as you spoke these words your life too deserted you, fleeing indignantly, unless I am mistaken.’ The ancient lives tell us that Virgil died before he could finish the *Aeneid*; Petrarch imagines him dying as he wrote what is now the last line of the poem. Petrarch also confided the most important moments of his own life to his manuscript of Virgil: on the flyleaf he wrote about his first meeting with Laura in Avignon on 6th April 1327 and her death in the plague of 1348.

Petrarch set himself the task of rivalling Virgil’s poetic output. He wrote twelve eclogues, the *Bucolicum Carmen*, but very different in character from Virgil’s *Eclogues* in their sustained allegorical manner. The first eclogue is in the form of a dialogue between Silvius (a mask for Petrarch as poet of the pastoral woods, *silvae*) and Monicus (a mask for his brother Gherardo, a ‘monk’), dramatizing the life-long tension between Petrarch’s love for the things of this world – classical antiquity and Laura – and his Christian faith. The autobiographical, confessional strain that runs through Petrarch’s writing owes much to the *Confessions* of St Augustine, the great Christian Father who was as constant a companion as were his beloved pagan authors.

Petrarch and Livy

Petrarch also set about a great epic in Latin to rival the *Aeneid*, the *Africa*, on the

subject of the war between Scipio Africanus and Hannibal. Despite years of writing and rewriting, Petrarch left it unfinished. His own dissatisfaction with the work has led subsequent generations largely to ignore it as a poetic failure. It is unfortunate too that the last major edition of the poem was published in 1926 as the first volume in a National Edition of Petrarch, a project fuelled by the nationalism of Mussolini’s Italy – ten years before another Italian imperialist intervention in Africa, Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia).

The *Africa*’s hero Scipio was Petrarch’s ideal of ancient virtue and humanity. The main source for his career was Livy, and Petrarch did much to bring Livy back to life through collecting manuscripts and textual scholarship. As a result he probably had a better text of Livy than anyone since antiquity. The roles of writer and scholar were not distinct for Petrarch.

Petrarch and Cicero

In the first two books of the *Africa* the model is not so much Livy as Cicero. In a dream Scipio Africanus meets his dead father, who tells his son of his own death in battle, before unveiling a prophecy of the further course of the war against Hannibal, and of the future history of Rome, down to the time when a Tuscan poet (Petrarch) will sing of Africanus’ deeds. The dream vision is modelled on that at the end of Cicero’s philosophical and political treatise *On the Republic*, where Africanus in a dream ascends to the stars to meet the soul of his father, who inspires him to great deeds in the service of the Roman state. Dream and prophecy are potent devices for linking past and present, and for reviving the ghosts of the past: like Cicero, Virgil had also used this trick, most notably in Aeneas’ dreamlike descent to the Underworld to be reunited with his dead father in book six of the *Aeneid*.

Cicero was one of Petrarch’s most intimate companions from the Roman past. Cicero’s companionability was partly due to the survival of many of his letters to his friends, which allow the fourteenth- (and twenty-first-) century reader an intimacy

possible with few other ancient authors. That we can eavesdrop on Cicero in this way is partly due to the scholarly detective work of Petrarch, who discovered a manuscript of Cicero's *Letters to Atticus* in the cathedral library in Verona in 1345.

Cicero's letters were the models for Petrarch's own forty-two books of letters. Ten of these letters are addressed to great writers of the past, postcards to the dead that create the illusion of immediate personal contact beyond the grave. For example Petrarch writes to Homer: 'Francesco sends greetings to Homer, the prince of Greek poetry. For some time now I have meant to write to you and would have done so except for my feeble command of your language.' One of Petrarch's great frustrations was that he was never able to learn enough Greek to read Homer fluently.

Petrarch and Ennius

In the last book of the *Africa* Petrarch borrows a trick from another ancient author to reanimate the past. From references in other classical texts he knew that in the prologue to his lost epic on Roman history, the *Annals*, Ennius (239–169 B.C.) had told of a dream in which a phantom of Homer had appeared to announce to him that the actual soul of Homer had been reincarnated in Ennius himself, an audacious way of making the claim to be the Roman Homer. At the beginning of book nine of the *Africa* Ennius is on board with Scipio as he sails from Carthage back to Rome to celebrate his triumph over Hannibal. To while away the hours he tells Scipio of a dream in which he met the ghost of Homer, so realizing a communion from which Petrarch himself was excluded by his inability to read Homer's Greek. At the end of the dream Homer shows Ennius the figure of a pensive young man seated in a valley among laurel trees, one Franciscus (Francesco Petrarca) who, Homer announces, will restore the ancient Muses and write an epic on Scipio with the title *Africa*. Ennius is on the point of starting a conversation with Petrarch when, he tells Scipio, the morning trumpet blew and he woke to find himself in Scipio's camp at Carthage. The impossible dream of immediate contact between Petrarch and the classical past.

Back in Rome Ennius rides in triumph up to the Capitol by Scipio's side, celebrating a triumph of poetry as well as of arms. In a personal intervention Petrarch then says: 'Fifteen hundred years later I myself managed to follow their faint footsteps along the scrubby path, trusting in my unequal strength, imitating the great honours of the ancient heroes with a crown of the same leaves and in the same place, and with the glorious name of poet.' He refers to his boldest attempt to relive the past, his coronation with a laurel

wreath on the Capitol in Rome, on Easter Sunday 1341. No Roman poet in antiquity had in fact been honoured in this way, and the procedures of the ceremony had more to do with the practices of the medieval university than of ancient Rome. Nevertheless this invented tradition (the 'poet laureate') eloquently symbolized Petrarch's dreams, dreams in no small measure made real, of reviving classical antiquity.

Petrarch, poet laureate

The figure of Virgil in Simone Martini's painting also wears a laurel wreath, hinting at a degree of identification between Petrarch and his classical hero (Virgil never claims a laurel wreath for himself). The laurel, evergreen token of poetic fame, is also the symbol which unites Petrarch's love for antiquity with his love for Laura, the 'laurel-girl' (*laurea*, *laurus* in Latin). In the *Metamorphoses* Ovid tells of the god of poetry Apollo's pursuit of the nymph Daphne (whose name means 'laurel' in Greek) and her transformation into the laurel-tree. Petrarch rings endless changes on the Ovidian myth in his Italian love-poems to and about Laura: both during her life and after her death final possession of the human object of desire was as impossible for Petrarch as it was for Apollo, and as impossible ultimately as Petrarch's desire to breathe the same air as the great men and writers of antiquity.

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